> Ross Jackson, PhD:

Individualism or Community?

For the last thirty years or so, an increase in self-interest has permeated every aspect of human existence, both at the individual and national level. President John F. Kennedy's urging to "ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for country" seems totally alien to most of today's young people.

Presently, the focus is on "me first-ism": About rights rather than responsibilities; about more "stuff" for me without much regard for overloading the ecosystem or for starving children in Africa; and most of all about increasing personal wealth. The latter goal is not so much to be accomplished by the sweat of one's brow, but rather by speculation – whether it is on real estate values for individuals or credit swaps, currency trading and subprime mortgages for financial institutions.

It is no coincidence that the shift in values at the personal level has followed the "greed is good" mantra of neoliberal economics, which has been driving the planet to ruin for the last thirty years while an extremely small minority has seen its wealth increase by the day.

This is a parasitic economic system that rewards the trashing of the environment and asset speculation: A model that not just protects financial institutions from having to pay the true cost of their self-serving actions, but also rewards them with government bailouts when bottom lines head south as they inevitably do. These rescue packages for the wealthy put yet more downward pressure on the already battered middle class working people.

This is the so-called "austerity option", formerly reserved by the IMF (International Monetary Fund) for cash-squeezed emerging economies to prevent them from developing, but now also applied to the industrialized countries of southern Europe.

The question I seek an answer to here is whether what we are currently observing is a permanent trend or merely temporary deviation from the long-term tradition of valuing community ahead of the individual. I will argue for the latter.

For millennia humans have survived only because we learned to live in tribes and cooperate to achieve a greater good. In the early days of human evolution, there was no way an individual could survive for long on his or her own. Those tribes that best learned to cooperate managed to pass on their genes. Others, perhaps less successful at working together, disappeared under the sands of time.

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This social characteristic is programmed so deeply in our DNA that no amount of man-made changes can alter this fundamental fact: The ways in which we organize our societies, political systems, economies, and – indeed – lives seem inescapably linked to our instinct for cooperation. This indisputable fact is key to understanding how the coming shift away from individualism, and toward a revival of communal living, will affect all aspects of our lifestyle. It will determine the way we design our communities, the way we educate our children, and our attitude toward wealth and income disparities. It will also shape our attitude toward health and social issues, and our thoughts on consumption, investment and saving.

All of these considerations will undergo a dramatic shift as a new outlook on humanity's place in the grand order of things works its way through the entire fabric of our society. I expect that three separate forces will push society in one and the same direction — toward a more egalitarian way of life, i.e. a more equal distribution of wealth, income and influence. This society I refer to as "Gaian". [1]

The first driving force is an ideological one. It is more or less dictated by the emerging view that considers humanity an integral part of nature, and hence of Gaia or the Living Earth. Imagine for a moment a world in which there is broad agreement that limits must be placed on resource usage. These restrictions are imposed by a both sense of respect for, and responsibility to, future generations and a need for attaining a truly sustainable form of development.

The response of our current society to such restrictions suddenly forced upon it would fall into two quite distinct categories: The neoliberal reaction would be for the strong to attempt to maintain their lifestyle and dominant position by exploiting the weak while others might try to forge union between local communities in order to better deal with the crisis by sharing the limited resources available.

In the "Gaian" worldview, only the latter would make any sense. Thus, the old paradigm practices of exploitation and accumulation of material possessions, and of measuring success by individual wealth would come to be seen as anti-social. Success will be measured more by an individual's contributions to the well-being of local societies. This may be a proficiency in a particular trade or profession, hard work, initiative, artistic talent, kindness, inventiveness, community leadership, and such — all things that cannot be measured by money.

The second egalitarian driver will be economic. Imagine global society after a peak oil shock followed by energy scarcity, or even after the introduction of an effective rationing system for fossil fuels to combat global warming. We are heading inexorably to one of these two scenarios at this moment. In either case, we are talking about a period of significant downsizing of the global economy accompanied by monumental shifts in production, transportation and trade patterns, unprecedented business failures, widespread unemployment and shrinking national budgets.

In such an environment, where great burdens will be placed on all sectors of society, there will be enormous pressure on those with high incomes

to contribute more to the common pot. We saw a similar reaction, though on a much smaller scale, to the recent financial crisis with calls for caps on salaries and bonuses paid out to mostly inept financial sector executives. Too great a disparity in income is already being considered socially unacceptable.

The third force pushing toward a more egalitarian society will be evidence-based rationality. Based on solid evidence, it will become much clearer to the broad populace what is already clear to a small band of social researchers: Almost all social ills plaguing modern society are a direct result of too great a disparity in income.

It will be acknowledged that those societies with the lowest Gini coefficients (rich/poor ratios) also happen to be those with the happiest citizens, the greatest societal harmony and the least number of social and health issues. This was recently documented in a study by British researchers Richard Wilkinson and Kate Picket. [2]

Furthermore, it will be acknowledged that the cause of high Gini coefficients in socially dysfunctional countries is a direct result of their economic systems.

The idea of a more egalitarian civilization may send cold chills down the spines of those who associate egalitarianism with socialism or even communism, with associated visions of top down central planning, lack of freedom and an inefficient or inexistent private sector. But these are false images promoted by right-wing propagandists who fear losing their privileges.

If we take a closer look at the countries that score highest on equality and lowest on the Index of Health and Social Problems in the Wilkinson and Pickett study, we find the Scandinavian countries and Japan. These are the current societies that come closest to the ideal. None of these can be considered socialist, and none has ever flirted with communism. All are highly regarded, democratic, competitive societies with quite liberal private sectors and a minimum of corruption.

However, what does differentiate them, particularly the Scandinavian countries, is a larger public sector than more unequal societies. Their citizens are quite pragmatic about it: They are willing to pay higher taxes provided that everyone pays a fair share and that good value for (tax) money is obtained. This includes free education and medical care, and a good sense of security. According to the Wilkinson and Pickett study, Scandinavians and Japanese also get the additional bonus of enjoying better health at lower cost and fewer social problems overall.

One of the most noticeable differences between a current society and a fully developed "Gaian" one will be the flourishing of millions of thriving, healthy, local communities and neighbourhoods all over the world, having a high degree of self-determination and a great diversity in cultural profiles.

Lifestyles are going to change markedly. In its diversity, "Gaian" culture will come to resemble the rest of nature. The main drivers of this shift will also be ideological and economic forces.

Ideologically, holders of a Gaian worldview would prefer not to live in isolated apartments in sterile high rises surrounded by anonymous neighbours. A villa in the suburbs is also far from an ideal dwelling. For them, it would be like a prison.

Whether they live in big cities, suburbs, towns or villages, Gaians will organize their living conditions around a local community of like-

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minded souls, much like humans have always done in the past before the separatist worldview changed everything for a few centuries.

These communities will range from the most technologically advanced to bare subsistence groups. However, their values will be similar. Rural villages and big city eco-neighbourhoods will vary in size, but a critical threshold will be the number of people that a single individual can relate to personally. This is a condition for attaining a community on a human scale.

Personal contact is one of the most important components of the glue holding a community together, i.e. recognition and acceptance within any given community. Because of the sheer magnitude of human diversity, everyone will be able to find a community that matches their needs and aspirations.

Central to the values of Gaians, these communities will be characterized by using natural as opposed to synthetic products: Organic food, renewable energy, clean water, and close contact with nature.

In a fully-developed Gaian culture, most citizens will be aware of the importance of ecology and permaculture design from their primary education. They will be tolerant toward those of other races, religions and cultures. Their housing will be very energy efficient. Many will produce much of their own energy, primarily solar, while others will be linked to a regional CPH (Combined Heat and Power) facility.

The availability of local energy production will be a prime driver of decentralization of society, including a high degree of local democracy and local autonomy. Travel is likely to be much more limited than today, and mostly by highly efficient public transportation.
The thing that will most distinguish these eco-communities from today's typical neighbourhood is their scope: They are not just to be spaces for living. Many residents will have their work there as well, offering various services to their local circle and beyond.

The permanence of these local communities will be established by law, which will define the various rights and obligations. These include a budget from the public purse and a degree of control over local environment besides public responsibilities such as primary education and care for the elderly.

Usually, each eco-village will be part of a larger eco-town; and each eco-neighbourhood part of an eco-city. The larger units will have administrative responsibility for various functions that are better handled on a larger scale such as public transportation, sewage treatment, higher institutions of learning, etc.

Many needs that would be fulfilled today at a regional shopping centre (normally after travel by car) will be fulfilled within walking distance and often by other community members. Not least of these will be the local food market: The heart of the community. Much of its food will be produced in the community – particularly in rural communities, but also to some extent in urban ones.

Ideology alone will not, however, bring about the shift in lifestyle. The resistance of the ruling political / economic establishment is just too massive. The current industrialized country infrastructure creates enormous physical and ideological barriers to the evolution of healthy eco-communities. But once we enter the period of energy descent a change in lifestyle will become an existential necessity.

When this shift occurs, it will be as much for economic reasons, almost as an explosion: Jobs disappear, food and transportation costs increase, and welfare benefits shrink. When things start falling apart, old barriers will fall. A shift from the cities to the countryside into self-sufficient eco-communities will be one of the consequences. Those remaining in the cities will come together and form cooperative urban eco-neighbourhoods.

"Gaian" society can be expected to be a healthier, happier, more harmonious civilization than the present one. Much of this may be ascribed to its more egalitarian structure. David Korten has eloquently described the coming transition as a shift "from empire to earth community". This new community will contain two primary elements: A turning away from money to life as our defining value, and a turning away from relationships based on power to partnerships founded on organizing principles discerned from the study of healthy living systems". [3] ❊

References

[1] Ross Jackson, Occupy World Street: A Global Roadmap for Radical Economic and Political Reform (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2012).

[2] Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010).

[3] David Korten, The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler and Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 2006), p. 295.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ross Jackson is chairman of the charitable association Gaia Trust, Denmark, major shareholder of organic foods wholesaler Urtekram, and author of Occupy World Street: A Global Roadmap for Radical Economic and Political Reform.